



Crossing the Finish Line

Fire Season 2003

Mile twenty-six of this year's marathon fire season seemed to go on forever. But, Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks crossed the finish line at the end of October when the first rains dampened the summer's remaining fires. You could hear a collective sigh of relief not only from park staff but also local community residents who patiently endured weeks of noisy aircraft and hazy skies.

"It was a long fire season but one that was filled with many positive accomplishments," says Superintendent Richard H. Martin. "Our fire staff worked long hours in hazardous conditions and still consistently made sound decisions to protect local communities and maintain fire's natural role in the environment."

In early June, we sent you a newsletter to let you know what we had planned for the upcoming fire season. Now, we want to tell you how we did at meeting our goals and what surprises we handled along the way.

Unplanned Events

By far, the most significant workload this year resulted from unplanned events. Forty-eight separate lightning-caused fires started in the parks. While lightning fires are a common occurrence each summer, we had more ignitions this year than we have had in 15 years (since 1988).



As usual, fire managers assessed each lightning ignition individually to determine how to respond. Because of concerns for private property and the potential for excessive smoke, managers initiated suppression actions on 21 of these fires. *Homer's Nose 2* and *Paradise 2* became costly incidents due to the use of aircraft for water and retardant drops. This strategy was selected because the terrain was so hazardous for ground firefighters.

The 27 remaining lightning-caused fires were managed as *fire use projects* and allowed to spread naturally to improve forest conditions. While most of these fires never grew beyond an acre, three became sizeable and achieved very positive benefits for local ecosystems.

Both the *West Kern Fire* in Sequoia NP (7,968 total acres, 3,510 acres in the park) and the *Williams Fire* in Kings Canyon NP (3,471 acres) began near the park boundary. In the past, boundary fires were routinely suppressed to prevent spread onto neighboring U.S. Forest Service lands. But this year, with the institution of a *fire use program*, the Sequoia and

Inyo National Forests were happy to manage these natural fires cooperatively with the parks. As a result, the West Kern and Williams fires burned across a line on a map that had previously been a huge barrier.

The third significant *fire use project* this summer was the *Giant Fire* (275 acres) in Sequoia's Giant Forest. While many prescribed burns have occurred in the grove over the last 30 years, the Giant Fire was only the second natural fire to exist in such a high-use area. "Previous prescribed burns are what made it all possible," says Bill Kaage, Fire Management Officer. The Giant Fire was surrounded by past burn projects which limited its spread. It was in this fire that the Washington Tree was damaged.

Planned Events

The parks planned to complete 13 projects this summer: 8 prescribed burns and 5 mechanical fuel reduction projects.

Three prescribed burns occurred totaling 2,955

- Continues on back side

2003 Accomplishments

| | |
|-----------------------|-------------|
| 25 Suppression Fires | 1,645 acres |
| 27 Fire Use Projects | 7,330 acres |
| 3 Prescribed Fires | 2,955 acres |
| 5 Mechanical Projects | 269 acres |

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Fire Season 2003
Packing Up

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Fire Season Highlights

Sequoia & Kings Canyon
National Parks

June

- Burning and thinning completed near Ash Mountain housing and facilities
- Ignitions finished on 2,703-acre Atwood Prescribed Fire in Mineral King area

July

- Thinning done around Oriole Lake cabins
- Dinely Fire suppressed (private and NPS)
- 23 lightning fires detected including Williams Fire and the Giant Fire
- Coffeepot Fire suppressed

August

- Thinning completed around communities of Wilsonia and Lodgepole
- 7 lightning fires detected including West Kern Fire

- Ignitions finished on the 502-acre Tharps Prescribed Fire (227 acres completed)

September

- 20 lightning fires detected including Homer's Nose 2 and Paradise 2
- First of three inter-agency management teams arrives in parks to help with fires

October

- Continued management of Kaweah-Kern
- Homer's Nose 2 Fire contained

November

- Paradise 2 Fire contained
- Crews began burning slash piles from thinning projects

acres. The largest burn was the *Atwood Prescribed Fire* at the end of June in the Mineral King area. Taking advantage of favorable conditions just before the July 4 holiday, fire crews spent one week igniting Atwood, mostly by air. The second significant burn of the season was the *Tharp's Prescribed Fire* in Giant Forest in August. Due to air quality conditions, ignitions were halted on this project with only 227 of 502 acres completed. Five other prescribed burns were planned but not started due to this year's lightning fires.

Through the use of private contractors, the parks completed all 5 mechanical fuel reduction projects (269 acres) that were planned in

Wilsonia, Oriole Lake, Lodgepole, Bearpaw, and Grant Grove. To protect private homes and park facilities from wildfire, crews removed small trees and brush, and then consolidated the material into nearly 2,300 piles. Park fire crews have already started burning these piles which will continue over the next few months.

So, as you can see, it was a busy year! We worked hard and achieved many things, both planned and unplanned. Our successes improved local conditions in the parks, but also served the larger national effort to reduce hazardous fuels, the risk of wildfire, and threats to both natural re-

sources and human communities. While there is always room for improvement, we are proud of our record and appreciate the support of local community residents and businesses.

Comments or Questions?

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For more information: www.nps.gov/seki.
Click on "Fire Information" for all press releases distributed this season, the project list, fire restrictions, smoke information, and fire research.